**Horror films and the attack on rationality**

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Why does horror attracts people as it does? Why spend several pounds on a film or book that you know is going to terrify you? Thomas Ligotti, a modern horror writer, presents a pessimistic philosophy, noting through his reading of H. P. Lovecraft a general distrust of the value of human consciousness and its place in the world. This view could be associated with Jung’s critique of a dominant conscious rationality and his own Nietzschean scepticism about the achievements of rationality since the Enlightenment.

For Jung ‘...reason and the will that is grounded in reason are valid only up to a point. The further we go in the direction selected by reason, the surer we may be that we are excluding the irrational possibilities of life which have just as much right to be lived....’ (Jung, 1943 orig.1916, para.72).

The attraction and use of horror and the Gothic for interest and entertainment parallels a postmodern Jungian distrust in the achievements and place of human consciousness in Nature. In encountering and enjoying horror what is being sought is a transcendence of the limits of rational consciousness and an experience of the sublime. At its core, the horror genre sees our humanness and consciousness not as an enhancement or culmination of Nature but an aberration. A mistake. In horror we may be seeking a route past such limitations.

“Through our senses we experience the known, but our intuitions point to things that are unknown and hidden, that by their very nature are secret. If they ever become conscious, they are intentionally kept secret and concealed, for which reason they have been regarded from earliest times as mysterious, uncanny, and deceptive. They are hidden from man, and he hides himself from them out of religious awe, protecting himself with the shield of science and reason.” (Jung, 1930: para 148)

**The popular growth of Gothic horror**

From a psychoanalytic point of view it has been said that, “The Gothic arises out of the immediate needs of the reading public to escape from conventional life and articulate…. the turbulence of their psychic existence. We may see Freud as the intellectual counterpart of this process....The Gothic . . . acclimatised the culture to the types of ideas Freud was to present as truth by presenting them as fiction.” (Day, 1985:179). Schneider (2004) in his introduction to *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis*, follows this with, “….one of the key tasks is…translation, …. writing and rewriting the Gothic novel’s ……ideas and constructs in terms that are more explicitly Freudian, Jungian, Kleinian, Lacanian, etc” (Schneider, 2004, pp 11-12).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jung makes it quite clear that the material and technological benefits brought about by scientific rationality over the last five hundred years have come at great cost to the human psyche itself. In objectifying our orientation towards nature so as better to examine and exploit the world we have cut ourselves off from that world. As Edelglass puts it ‘If we systematically think of a world in which human beings do not exist (except as the detached observer), we should not be surprised to find ourselves creating a world in which they can’t exist’ (Edelglass et al., 1992: 19). And just as we have cut ourselves off from the outer world of nature, so we have also cut ourselves off from our inner nature - the unconscious psyche. The danger of this, as Jung realised, is that unconscious contents get projected outside us so that, humankind gradually inhabits a world of shadows - projections that fall far short of the ‘objective’ and ‘rational’ which Enlightenment thinking believed it had achieved (in Jung, 1943, paras.72-75). “The ordered cosmos he believes in by day is meant to protect him from the fear of chaos that bests him by night - his enlightenment is born of night-fears!” (Jung, 1930: para.148)

It is no coincidence that Gothic horror literature began just as a dominant style of consciousness described as Enlightenment rationality became established in the late 18th century. After Walpole’s seminal *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) came Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) “whose famous novels” H.P.Lovecraft writes, “made terror and suspense a fashion, and who set new and higher standards in the domain of macabre and fear-inspiring atmosphere” (Lovecraft, 1927). After this period we enter an era of horror fiction more familiar to modern times, largely due to the way cinema has turned to such narratives for popular films. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) was followed by John Polidori’s story *The Vampyre*; Edgar Allen Poe (1809-49) took the genre to further heights in the 19th century followed by Capt. Marryat (*The Werewolf* , 1839), and Robert Louis Stevenson with his seminal *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

All these lead up to the stories of H. P. Lovecraft himself (1890-1937) who, convinced of the pre-human, archetypal roots of supernatural horror wrote,

“No amount of rationalisation, reform, or Freudian analysis can quite annul the thrill of the chimney-corner whisper or the lonely wood….there is an actual physiological fixation of the old instincts in our nervous tissue which would make them obscurely operative even were the conscious mind to be purged of all sources of wonder.” (Lovecraft, 1927: 2)

Writers of horror literature from H.P. Lovecraft to Thomas Ligotti [[2]](#footnote-2) have long emphasised that we live with a barely concealed awareness of the insignificance of human life in a meaningless universe. It is this sense of ourselves that is stirred up and confirmed in the horror story.[[3]](#footnote-3)

“Consciousness has forced us into the paradoxical position of striving to be unselfconscious of what we are, hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones.….we need some fabulous illusions….life is a confidence trick we must run on ourselves, hoping we do not …[find ourselves] stripped of our defence mechanisms and standing stark naked before the silent staring void.” (Ligotti, 2012: 28-9).

In the void experience what we lose is a sense of self, or rather a meaningful relationship between self and world. (Hodson, 2004: 1) This is the Other of non-ordinary reality, which brings with it the fear of death and the terror of going mad. We often find in the horror literature of Edgar Allen Poe and H. P. Lovecraft how entering death or madness may seem an attractive way to resolve the gap between everyday consciousness and non-ordinary realities. A fear of death or madness may function more as an emotional metaphor in this case, to help the subject keep a psychological grasp on the otherness experienced as alien to ‘normal’ consciousness.

Quite apart from the sublime imagery of horror literature and the terrible disturbances of the world it depicts, for the last ninety years it has been through the medium of film that horror that has grabbed and disturbed our imaginations. As Barbara Creed writes, “The horror genre is also radical in that it explores the formation of human subjectivity, the conditions under which subjectivity disintegrates, and the subject’s fascination for and dread of ….death.” (Creed, 2004:192).[[4]](#footnote-4) The divided and displaced self is often a theme for horror movies - many such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel 1956) and *The Thing* (Carpenter, 1982) depict the breakdown of identity; others the breakdown of difference between the living and the dead (vampire and zombie films). Such splits in reality and in the integrity of human identity can be found in Freud’s case history titles such as ‘The Wolf Man’ and ‘The Rat Man’ .

Jung admired *The Student of Prague* (1927) for its accurate depiction of the archetypal Shadow. In this 1927 film a penniless student makes a Faustian pact that results in him losing his soul; the horror of his condition is brought home at the start of this clip, when he finds he has no reflection in the mirror and his doppelganger appears at the window showing how his identity has been taken over completely.

A modern doppelgänger movie is *Triangle* (Smith 2009) - a horror drama which holds many of the elements I have referred to - and which works on our imaginations in a way that disturbs the viewer and challenges what rational consciousness has always thought inviolate. The film begins with a mother and child under stress and a mysterious ring on her doorbell. Finding no one there the young woman proceeds to join friends on a sailing trip. One friend is told that her child is at school but another points out it is Saturday, there is no school so this cannot be true.

The four friends sail off and get caught in an unusual storm which results in them calling for help from their upturned boat. A gigantic liner hauls into view and thinking they see someone beckoning them from the deck they climb board. The ship appears to be deserted. This is where the horror starts and the rational ends. Up to this point we have been watching a tense but not irrational dynamic between four friends with a bit of mystery about one of them. As events on the boat progress our protagonist experiences her friends being shot at by a masked character and escapes to the bowels of the ship where she finds dozens of scrunched up notes reading “IF THEY BOARD KILL THEM ALL”. She tries writing one herself and confirms they are all in her own handwriting. “She” has been here before. This theme is reinforced when she arms herself to continue her search and, in the mirrored ballroom comes across her doppelgänger - who appears exactly the same but without a gun. “You are not me” our protagonist mutters in terror - even though it is *her* who holds the weapon. But who is the “her” we know? Our sense of assuredness in knowing the identity and place of the character we have been following is disrupted. More events follow that reveal we are in a cycle of repeated events and endless time. This is a horrific multiverse and not the secure singularity we assume of our own lives and we had assumed of hers. Through our identification with the protagonist we are offered a glimpse into the void. As Nietzsche wrote,

“He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.”[[5]](#footnote-5) (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* aphorism 146)

Our willingness to experience horror through film, games or literature, goes beyond current understandings in psychology and film cognition. Perhaps it is an effort to engage with transcendent experience - achieved in other traditions through ritual, epiphany, prayer or meditation? But not only are these side-lined in modernity, they are also long-haul activities requiring practice, faith and a belief in the authority of the institutions that support them. Plugging into horror gives an experience that transcends assured realities in its own way. Like the instinct for religion, maybe we have an instinctual need know that our conscious experience is not all there is to reality. Plugging into horror through watching the horror movie offers an experience that transcends assured realities without actual harm to ourselves.

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1. Another, very different, example is Julian Hoxter’s look at how, in the Italian *giallo* horror films of Dario Argento, the “complex, shifting connection between individuals and . . . the world of objects which they inhabit” (1998: 99) exemplifies certain key principles of Kleinian object-relations theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Throughout his book, Ligotti acknowledges the influence of Norwegian pessimistic philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe and his monograph *The Last Messiah* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As Ligotti states, “Because of consciousness, parent of all horrors, we became susceptible to thoughts that were startling and dreadful to us, thoughts that have never been equitably balanced by those that are collected and reassuring”. (Ligotti, 2012: 27) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Creed also writes: ““Like Freud’s dreams and case histories, the horror film was quick to explore the nature of perversity. Themes of castration, bestiality, masochism, sexual abuse, and animal phobias all made early appearances…….” (Creed 2004: 189) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. trans Hollingdale

Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)